Chapter III

“Caught Between Two Worlds:” Democratic Futures and the Moral Economy of Democracy

In May 1984, Martha, a homemaker and mother of three from Adrogué in the southern belt of the conurbano, sent a letter to Alfonsín. After “much deliberation” she decided to write to the president, recently inaugurated five months before, in the hopes that he could help her husband, Mario, recover his job. In 1979, Mario had been fired from the corn refinery where he worked. Since then, Martha explained, her family had “experienced hard times, and we are still struggling.” To make ends meet Mario sold veterinary supplies, driving “between 300 to 400 kilometers a day” in the family’s “run-down, 1971 Renault 6.” After car and housing payments, “everyday more expensive,” the family was barely able to cover the costs of food. Pregnant with her fourth child, Martha explained that her baby gave her the courage to write the president to ask him to reverse the “injustice committed against [Mario]” and by extension her family. Though she knew Alfonsín “faced many challenges”, she believed he could help, concluding, “sometimes you need to push miracles a little to make them happen.”

---


Martha’s personal petition touched on one of the great paradoxes of Argentina’s democratic opening: Constitutional restoration coincided with the nation’s worst economic and social crisis since the 1930s. The new democracy was being forged amid the ruins of state terror, a legacy that encompassed not only the disappeared, but also a hobbled manufacturing economy and destitution. To cite just one example, in the mid 1980s, food production in Argentina was sufficient so that everyone should have been able to eat with nutritional levels that surpassed World Bank recommendations by 40%. Yet when the new administration assumed office, it found that 25% of the population had “unsatisfied basic needs.” In other words, a quarter of all Argentines suffered some form of hunger. At the onset of the Alfonsín administration, these challenges, including a 43 billion dollar external debt and 15 percent unemployment, did not overshadow widespread optimism for the future. Martha, like many Argentines, pinned her hopes on Alfonsín in anticipation that her family’s needs would finally be fulfilled. Though “democracy” is not mentioned by name, the future that Martha envisioned echoed a familiar expectation that the democratic era would, to paraphrase the UCR’s most famous campaign slogan, “feed, educate, and heal.”

This chapter looks at the construction and evolution of democratic political culture from the perspective of individual citizens like Martha, in conjunction with the designs of state planners and government officials. The narrative focus concentrates roughly on the first two years of the Alfonsín administration, from late 1983 to early 1986, the period of greatest consensus and widespread expectations for the democratic future. During this time, and despite some ominous signs on the horizon, individuals and government officials widely believed in the transcendent power of newly restored
democratic government to swiftly tackle and undo the economic and social woes facing the nation.

The first part of the chapter examines citizen proposals sent to Alfonsín, and embeds them within national discussions about the reach of the state, economic recovery, and public services. These letters to Alfonsín illuminate the lived experience of the transition to democracy. Indeed, “democracy” is the key word that permeates citizen petitions to the president. In part, the goal of this chapter seeks to answer a question: What did democratic restoration mean to self-described “ordinary” Argentines - the middle and lower-middle class individuals who wrote to the president with their observations, doubts, and hopes for the future? That deceptively straightforward inquiry eludes simple answers, none of them entirely conclusive or encompassing. Citizens were in dialogue with the national course of events, and they inscribed themselves as part of a new national project, testing revived public languages of democracy, human rights, and social justice while laying bare the growing distance between their expectations and their daily lives. As this chapter demonstrates, citizen petitions open a window on to an

---

3 The letters on which this chapter is based are housed in the Archivo General de la Nación/Departamento Archivo Intermedio (AGN/DAI), Fondo Documental “Presidencia de la Nación. Secretaría Privada, Presidencia Alfonsín (1983-1989).” I have omitted the last names of letter writers to protect their identities. Though Alfonsín received letters from all over the country, the letters cited in this chapter were sent from Buenos Aires and the surrounding suburbs, in line with the geographic focus of the rest of the dissertation. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

4 Though elections and political parties are emphasized as the main sites of Latin American democratic transitions, letter writing also deserves a place in the broad spectrum of revived public life as petitioners, through private communications, tested the rhetoric and limits of national political openings. Letter writing has been a key source of inquiry for historians of twentieth century Latin America. For investigations of letters to Getulio Vargas see: Joel Wolfe, ‘Father of the Poor or Mother of the Rich? Getulio Vargas, Industrial Workers, and Constructions of Class, Gender, and Populism in São Paulo, 1930–1954,’ Radical History Review, vol. 58(Winter 1994), pp. 80–111. Also Sueann Caulfield, In Defense of Honor: Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early Twentieth-Century Brazil (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). For the Mexican case, specifically the 1989 elections, see: Adolfo Gilly, and Rhina Roux. Cartas a Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Colección Problemas de México (Ediciones Era). Mexico City: Era, 1989. In the context of contemporary century Argentina, two instances of letter writing have received attention. Eva Perón received tens of thousands of letters daily requesting material assistance and financial support from through her namesake foundation. Scholars have also examined the public letter writing campaign initiated by
evolving moral economy of democracy, which linked the realms of public enterprise, local government, and consumption toward the fulfillment of both individual needs and the public good.\(^5\)

In the concluding final section, the chapter turns to the Alfonsín government’s most ambitious attempt to forge a hegemonic project for the new democracy. In late 1985, Alfonsín delivered the “Parque Norte” address. The speech was a blueprint for a revived democratic culture. Read in conjunction with citizen petitions, the proposal for a new democratic republic illuminates how during an era of simultaneous political openings and escalating fiscal crisis, the tensions between (and desires for) social justice and modernization shaped ongoing democratic contests, which took root in the realms of daily life.

“Medicine for a Sick Nation”

The euphoria of democratric return at the beginning of the Alfonsín presidency contrasted sharply with the sober social and economic realities that the new democracy inherited. With inflation at 353 percent by the end of 1983, and a fiscal deficit hovering at

\(^5\) My discussion of the moral economy of democracy takes off from E.P. Thompson’s groundbreaking analysis of food riots in eighteenth century England. He presents moral economy as “a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor” (p. 79); E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” Past and Present 50 (Feb. 1971): 76 – 136. In case of the Argentine transition to democracy, the concept is useful to understand the ways that individuals inserted themselves into realms of economic exchange within the context of newly restored constitutional government. Individual notions of economic fairness were grounded in a history of state intervention over the course of the twentieth century, as well from the immediate memory of the fiscal chaos of the military regime. At the same time, ideas of economic justice and individual prosperity were in flux when Alfonsin took office due to staggering levels of national debt and rising levels of inflation. Individuals grappled with this interplay of economic forces and they used newly revised languages of democracy and human rights to make their claims.
around 15 percent, Raúl Prebisch, an early and key economic advisor to the Alfonsín government, delivered a solemn New Year’s message. “We cannot expect miracles,” he said to an audience in the province of Tucumán. “We must have faith, and above all, patience.” Yet while economic experts wrung their hands at the financial panorama, and as columnists warned of a “ticking economic time bomb,” Argentines harbored great hopes for a swift recovery. Alongside stories of the rising cost of living and escalating inflation, there was much more emphasis in newspapers, on T.V. talk shows, and in daily conversation that democracy would take care of fiscal distress in relatively short order. At the onset of the Alfonsín presidency, Argentines seemed to heed Raúl Prebisch’s counsel to grant democracy the faith, patience, and time to work.

The democratic opening elicited genuine excitement for a new and just future. Jorge, a 55-year-old emergency room doctor from Buenos Aires, expressed the exuberance of the moment in a letter to Alfonsín:

The hour of truth, justice, decency, and honesty has arrived. The road that you will travel will be bumpy and full of thorns, but Argentines are proud that a simple, human man full of great virtues will be able to rescue this sick Argentina from its stage four coma, as they say in medicine. With the support of all Argentines fighting, working, and collaborating, in a not too distant future we will be recognized and respected by all the nations of the world. You have already begun by stepping firm and I can assure you that from October 30, 1983 [the election date], until today I have shed many tears of joy. We have had great Radicals, H. Yrigoyen, Alem, Balbín, Illía, and now you. What happiness for our beloved Argentina!

The optimism running through Jorge’s letter conveys a sense of historic renewal, with Alfonsín passing into history to assume his place in the pantheon of national (and Radical Party) heroes. Jorge was not alone in his sentiment. Small business owners, grade

---

8 AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90, 20229/84.
school children, housewives, and factory workers described in vivid detail the discussions they were having at home, work, and school in the wake of the presidential election. Their Christmas cards, photos, newspaper clippings, and hand written messages began arriving at the government palace immediately following Alfonsín’s inauguration on December 10, 1983. In addition to congratulations and well wishes for the new president, writers acknowledged they were witnessing an era of new beginnings. However, individuals paired their optimism with an awareness of the challenges that lay ahead. Jorge described Argentina as “sick” and Alfonsín as the doctor with the “cure.” Writers depicted Argentina as a nation in need of “healing,” and expressed their faith in Alfonsín as possessing the antidote. A retiree named María recalled a conversation with her friend, who described Alfonsín as a “witch doctor” because “of all of the measures you have to take, and all the people and issues you need to attend to.” María disagreed slightly with her friend. No magic potion was necessary, she explained, “…I prefer to think of you as the right medical doctor to save this sick nation from the many serious illnesses we are suffering.”

The repeated image of sickness in the body of the nation had its roots in the recent past. Some of the most enduring propaganda of the military regime depicted Argentina as under attack from a corrosive cancer or invading parasites. For his part, Alfonsín evoked the idea of a nation in need of healing throughout his campaign (the rallying cry of his electoral victory proclaimed that democracy would “cure”) and government officials rehabilitated the metaphor, sometimes unwittingly, as a succinct diagnostic of the state of the nation during the administration’s lowest moments. “Health versus sickness” also echoed one of the founding principles of the return to constitutional government, which

---

9 AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90, 20283/84.
positioned political democracy as the complete antithesis of authoritarianism. From the onset of the democratic opening following the Malvinas War, Alfonsín and his advisors presented political democracy as the salve, panacea, and ultimate antidote for the economic and political woes of military rule. At the risk of oversimplification, they argued that if Argentina’s moral decline were direct consequences of authoritarianism, it followed that political democracy would forge a new “social pact” to restore financial and social stability. While the dichotomy of dictatorship versus democracy originated in broader theories of Latin American democratic transitions, it resonated throughout public life, and had great implications for the fate of the Alfonsín government, especially when it became clear that political democracy alone could not cure all of the nation’s illnesses. At the beginning of the administration, however, the tension between two seemingly antithetical political forms sustained widespread consensus and triumphant expectation.

If Alfonsinismo signified the remaking of political culture, part of the appeal of reconstruction was Alfonsin himself. For many members of the middle classes, Alfonsín was “one of their own.” Following the rise of Peronism, Alfonsín’s Radical Party became linked in popular opinion as the voice of middle class values, the guarantee of political temperance, and a safeguard against the extremes of both military rule and armed revolution. A satirical piece in the weekly news magazine, Somos, congratulated the urban middle classes on its selection of a leader of such character: “Alfonsín seems honest, democratic, and strong. We…helped him win the election, along with scores of

---

10 Most recently, the historian Ezequiel Adamovsky has challenged the popular and scholarly understanding of the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) as a historically “middle class party.” His article traces the ways that the Radical Party did not actively cultivate a “middle class identity” until well into the mid-1930s. Ezequiel Adamovsky, “Acerca de la relación entre el Radicalismo argentino y la "clase media" (una vez más),” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (May, 2009) (pp. 209-251).
Peronist workers who joined our ranks, tired of thugs.\textsuperscript{11} The piece charted the historic fickleness of the Argentine middle classes - “bankers and dry cleaners, taxi drivers and doctors, butchers and lawyers” - “the true party of the masses,” that had supported the return of Perón in 1973, clamored for the dictatorship in 1976, and now, in 1983, carried the banner of democracy. Like all satire, the article struck a nerve: The military regime had indeed enjoyed tacit civilian support from 1976 through the Malvinas war. The extremes of the previous decade’s blood and chaos, the article intimated, required a clean slate that all Argentines, not just the political classes, demanded. For many, Alfonsín personified that break.

**The Limits of Politics and Economy**

The promise of 1983 did imply a decisive break with the past. As part of that severing, Argentines sent the president a variety of proposals for what they believed he must do to set the nation on a new course. These epistolary citizen proposals emphasized economic recovery. They ranged from one-line missives—“To reactivate the economy do the opposite of what the IMF tells you!”—to rambling, undecipherable treatises on assembly line production in the northern province of Tucumán.\textsuperscript{12} Enrique, a retiree from Luján, located on the northwest outskirts of Greater Buenos Aires, designed intricate formulas for the sale of fiscal lands, a deposit scheme to pay off public debt, and fixed-term bonds to “end the constant flight of capital abroad.”\textsuperscript{13} A man named Diego sent his sketches for a five-year plan to revive agricultural production “without any additional cost to the state.” He was so certain of his claims that he assured the president that if he

\textsuperscript{11} *Somos*, Rolando Hanglin, “Manifiesto de la clase media (Perón ’73-Martínez de Hoz ’76-Alfonsín ’83),” January 6, 1984, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{12} AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90, 1735/84.
\textsuperscript{13} AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 3, 28994/84.
came across as a bit “loco”, he would be happy to send references to vouch for his credentials.\textsuperscript{14} And the president of the Buenos Aires Lawyers Association sent a notarized copy of a presentation he gave at the group’s April 1984 meeting on petroleum policies and the “urgent need” to strengthen national industry and revamp exports, “primarily energy and agriculture.”\textsuperscript{15} There were so many proposals of this sort that at one point in 1984, Alfonsin’s long-time secretary drafted a form letter in response:

\begin{quote}
President Alfonsín sincerely values your message in this transcendent moment that Argentines are living through, and he appreciates your offer to collaborate. As he continues to face tremendous responsibilities, he will need the support of citizens like you, who, with maturity and determination, secured the return of democracy.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Democracy, according to this official response, was a collective enterprise. If civilians were implicated in securing the democratic return, they were also complicit in ensuring its success.

The ideas embedded in citizen proposals are rich evidence of the momentum at the onset of the Alfonsín years. Individuals - from middle class lawyers, to pensioners, to assembly line workers - internalized and interpreted the public rhetoric of democracy through private communications with the president. A call to personal and collective sacrifice pervades their proposals. Many individuals equated the new democracy with collaboration beyond the ballot box along the lines of the social pact that Alfonsinistas argued would fortify the new democracy. Enrique’s formulas, for example, included a progressive tax and public municipal forums to vet fiscal land sales. Many individuals offered to work for the administration, “in the name of democracy,” for free, including CV’s and references with their letters. The sheer volume of proposals also speaks to the

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{14} AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90: 20215/84.
\item\textsuperscript{15} AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 3, 15443/84.
\item\textsuperscript{16} AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90: 20215/84.
\end{itemize}
openings of the time, in stark contrast to the previous decade of political proscription, self-censorship, and repression during which a frank letter to the authorities constituted a dangerous act.\footnote{Schemes and “big ideas” overwhelmed correspondence to the president. Many writers sensed this and acknowledged that their letters may be headed for bureaucratic oblivion, often commenting along the lines of, “I know this will probably never reach you.” Indeed, the vast majority of letters never reached Alfonsín and most did not receive a response, though all were stamped with a date of entry, assigned a file number, and, depending on their content, summarized by secretaries and sent on to the corresponding state, provincial or municipal agency. Most of the time, the bureaucratic trail ended there. For those on the receiving end of a letter from the president’s personal secretary, the response may also have signaled a form of democratic reciprocity, a sign that the highest office in the nation appreciated the seriousness of proposals, despite little chance of them going anywhere.}

While economic recovery was among individuals’ utmost concerns, within that sweeping category, the issue of national debt deserves special mention. When he took office, Alfonsín faced an unprecedented debt of 43 billion dollars. By the late-1970s, inflation had already been incorporated into the everyday “survival strategies” of Argentines in ways that altered consumption patterns and economic decision-making.\footnote{For a discussion of the impact of inflation on daily life from the 1970s through the late 1980s, see Gabriel Kessler and Silvia Sigal, “La hiperinflación en Argentina: comportamientos y representaciones sociales,” in Dario Canton, and Jorge Raúl Jorrat, eds. \textit{La Investigación social en Argentina a 40 años de la refundación del Instituto de Sociología} (Buenos Aires: Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani y Oficina de Publicaciones del CBC, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1997), 155-187.}

Foreign debt, however, remained the purview of economists and technocrats until 1982, when the debt crisis sparked off in Mexico hastened the economic collapse of the military regime and thrust the issue into the public realm as never before. Along with the specter of inflation, debt was one more legacy of authoritarianism that threatened to eclipse the return of democracy. Not two weeks after Alfonsín’s inauguration, while the celebrations still echoed in the center of Buenos Aires, the influential economic supplement of \textit{Clarín} declared, “The Honeymoon is Over!” and excoriated the administration to get down to solving the debt and curb government spending. Throughout 1984, the comings and goings of Bernardo Grinspun, the administration’s first Economic Minister, and his epic
negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) filled countless newspaper editorials, and hours of evening talk shows.

In the fiscal realm, the Alfonsín administration’s first economic team embraced a developmentalist agenda. Grinspun, the irascible minister, began his career as part of the Radical government of Arturo Illía (1963-1966), later forming part of Alfonsín’s inner circle of trusted associates. The echo of mid-1960s fiscal policy formed the basis of the economic philosophy of administration’s first year in office. As Grinspun described it, his top priority upon assuming his post was to “raise the factory curtains once again.” The reactivation of the industrial economy, the restoration of real wages, and putting an end to unemployment aimed to reverse the economic policies of the dictatorship while modernizing the Argentine economy. Almost immediately, however, debt and the burden of inflation got in the way of Grinspun’s intentions.

For one, restructuring the debt and settling payments proved a dicey political issue. Alfonsín proclaimed repeatedly that only the “legitimate” debt would be paid, and he authorized a congressional committee to investigate the origins of national debt. Any acceptance of the totality of debt would have signified compliance with the economic philosophy of the dictatorship. Combined with this idea, there was an implicit assumption on the part of the administration that officials at the IMF and the US Federal Reserve, which set global interest rates, would look favorably on Argentina as it democratized and

---


emerged from its long night of violence. Argentine officials encountered no such goodwill. Rumors circulated that Argentine debt would be classified as “problem loans,” since the country had fallen behind on interest payments. Added to these perceptions of economic insolvency, Grinspun did not make a good impression on Argentina’s lenders. In one infamous encounter, he was rumored to have dropped his pants during a meeting at the IMF. The image of the economic minister prostrate, defying the wizards of global capitalism secured Grinspun’s reputation, and proved a fitting metaphor for the relationship between Argentina and global financial institutions throughout the 1980s. It was sober evidence too of the gap between the initial economic intentions of the Alfonsín government, and the new constraints of globalization. Crippling interest rates led to reluctant requests for more loans by the end of 1984.

Unlike the chronicles of high-level meetings between state officials and international lending organizations, Argentines often cast the social impact of debt in a more encouraging light. On the one hand, individuals acknowledged the newness of debt as a national concern, a potential threat, whose burden was not yet fully known. On the other hand, unlike inflation, which many widely commented on as a force beyond personal control, debt was a concrete problem many believed could be easily undone. Lorena, a ten-year old girl from Buenos Aires, wrote to Alfonsín in July 1984, with her ideas for a telethon during which “all Argentines” could call in to pledge “one hundred

---

23 In late September 1984, Argentina reached a preliminary agreement with the IMF and private lending banks, which issued four billion more dollars in loans. At the same time, private lending banks agreed to roll over more than 13 billion in outstanding loans that were due in 1985. For more background on the 1984 debt negotiations see: Klaus Veigel, Dictatorship, democracy, and globalization: Argentina and the cost of paralysis, 1973-2001 (University Park, PA. : Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 144.
The simplicity of debt reversibility through collaboration and collective economic sacrifice united thinking about debt from children and adults alike. Hilarina, from her apartment in San Telmo, declared:

As an Argentine woman who loves her homeland, I am writing you about a problem facing the nation: external debt. Many of us would donate a paycheck or rent money to help the Nation. We could pay it off in installments, and that way feel deep in our blood like true Argentines. We could fulfill our duty to the nation, just like Remedios de Escalada de San Martín!25

Hilarina signaled her participation in a project of nation re-building of historic proportions. Patriotic fervor imbued much of the popular thinking about debt. The employees of Gummi Industries, a car parts manufacturer, informed the president that, “by spontaneous decision,” they had pledged one day’s salary toward debt repayment. In addition, their message continued, the company would donate an unstipulated amount every month “for as long as the country needed it.” Attached to the letter was a check for 71,788 pesos made out to the Ministry of Economy for “Debt Payment.” The workers justified their contribution, “[as] consequence of the spiritual state of the nation, unprecedented in the political history of our country and not seen since the days of National Organization.” Guillermo Alfonsín, the president’s brother and secretary, thanked the workers in a personal note, acknowledging the president was “deeply moved” by their gracious gesture.26

The letter arrived at the government palace in May 1984. By then, Alfonsín may certainly have been moved as labor relations were irrevocably strained following the failure of a government-sponsored union reform law

24 AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 3, 28976/84. Lorena may have been inspired the Malvinas War telethon, organized by the military junta in support of the soldiers fighting in the South Atlantic between April-June 1982.

25 AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90, 17349/84. María de los Remedios de Escalada de San Martín was the wife of José de San Martín. She coordinated Mendozan women to donate their jewels in support of the independence movement and the campaign of the Ejército de los Andes.

26 AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 8, 22028/84.
and escalating labor unrest, which would result in 13 general strikes by the end of his term. Beyond that, the Gummi employees’ gesture reflected a broader sentiment at the onset of the Alfonsin years when national debt, which became so commonplace a burden on governability over the next two decades, was initially regarded as somehow manageable and disentangled from other realms of institutional life. “Pay and it will be resolved,” the messages seem to suggest. References to independence and nation formation cast debt as imposed from the outside, an external constraint, which unlike the internally polarizing military trials or labor reforms could unite disparate camps in common cause.

Despite faith in a swift economic turn-around, fiscal woes threatened to eclipse the euphoria of democratic return. However, it was not just external financial burdens that presented cause for concern. There were also powerful domestic producers linked to world markets, notably the Rural Confederations of Argentina (CRA) and the Rural Society of Argentina (SRA), that were beginning to put increasing pressure on the government. As the administration approached its 100-day anniversary on March 23, 1984, the Commerce Secretary announced a one-week restriction on consumer sales of red meat in butcher shops, restaurants and super markets. According to government officials, the restrictions were an “emergency measure,” geared toward augmenting cattle reserves, and to reigning in agro producers, who the administration blamed for the

---

27 One of the first major legislative initiatives of the Alfonsin government was a plan to restructure the unions. The law, which was sent to Congress on December 17, 1983, became known as “La Ley Mucci,” after then Labor Secretary Antonio Mucci. The law’s many provisions, which were meant to dilute Peronist control of the union movement, included open/public control of elections, decentralization, minority representation, and breaking the stronghold of the newly reunited CGT. After months of bitter debate, the law was rejected in the Senate by March 1984. It constituted a costly legislative defeat for the Alfonsin administration, leading to the replacement of Mucci. More importantly, it set the stage for a renewed Peronist block in Congress and increasingly tense relations between the government and union leaders for the remainder of Alfonsin’s term. The Mucci Law is discussed in further detail in Chapter Four.

28 The veda de carne was announced by Commerce Secretary Ricardo Campero for March 12-19, 1984.
spurious activities resulting in food price hikes. The logic of the *veda de carne* supposed that a one-week suspension of meat sales would ultimately lower consumer prices by providing a brief respite from rising inflation, while boosting export stocks of meat.

Consumer sales restrictions had historical precedents dating back to the second Peronist administration, which limited consumer purchases of red meat in the early 1950s. As the historian Eduardo Elena has demonstrated, the tension between “wages and prices shaped daily experience,” while Peronist consumer policies sought to mold Argentines as “political and economic agents.”\(^\text{29}\) In the 1980s, the *veda de carne* was geared toward a similar purpose, however, in the context of the democratic return, the measures raised fundamental questions about the new limits of state intervention in the market.

From the start, the restrictions accomplished the opposite of what officials intended. Supermarkets in Buenos Aires and the conurbano were emptied in the days leading up to the sales suspensions. Price hikes of over 50% were reported on goods ranging from eggs to parsley. By the second day of the week long sales suspensions, *Clarín*, which was scathing in its coverage of the economic measure, announced shortages of substitute foods like chicken and fish. The president of the House Wives Association issued a critical statement: “The consumer doesn’t have any of these economic ideas in mind [when they buy]…When housewives go into the butcher shop, we want good quality meat at good prices!”\(^\text{30}\) Public lambasting sealed the fate of the measure. The conservative columnist, Joaquin Morales Solá, took stock of the meat restrictions, which ended shortly before the 100-day anniversary of the administration:

\(^{30}\) *Clarín*, “Coincidencia en la críticas,” March 10, 1984, 3.
The scarcity of many food products and their rising prices resulted in a curious event: the government opened up a conflict in the streets, in daily life, whereas before these conflicts were relegated to the bell towers of political power. The fights over the union law, or the first conflicts with the military do not affect the stomachs of Argentines.31

Morales Solá highlighted public outcry against the measure, which strained early faith in the government’s ability to quell economic anxieties. That fact was not lost on the administration, which admitted the measure failed to produce the intended results. As Morales Solá himself was aware, state regulation of the economy had a long history in Argentina. Morales Solá questioned the ongoing viability of that tradition, advocating instead the notion that government should limit its business in the realm of market exchange. Beyond the implications of Morales Solá’s editorial regarding fiscal policy, the failure of the veda de carne in public opinion rattled an initial popular belief in the correlation between political decision making and the economy, the logic of which supposed that political openings would herald economic recovery. Economic prosperity was built into an Alfonsínista definition of democracy from the beginning. The administration inspired confidence that civic openings would lead the way to economic health. The veda de carne called that position into question and ushered in a new locus of democratic contention and consensus-making. The realms of “daily life” - from the butcher shop, to the local vegetable stand - emerged as key battlegrounds of democratic restoration.

“Economic Exile”

The failure of the veda de carne did not reverberate so widely as to dampen the overall momentum of democratic exuberance. There were noticeable cracks in democratic euphoria, however. Human rights groups paired disappointments over

31 Clarín, “Todos los mitos políticos sobrevivirán?”, March 18, 1984, 10-11.
setbacks to justice with pointed criticisms of the administration’s handling of the military and human rights policy. The movement galvanized support to pressure the government to make good on its promises. Meanwhile, the first rumblings of military discontent struck an ominous chord for the fate of newly restored institutions. Between late 1983 and early 1986, however, overall public approval granted the administration a wide margin for containing cleavages. The UCR soundly won in mid-terms legislative elections in 1985, signaling confidence in the trajectory of the government. Yet, despite ongoing faith in the new government, important changes emerged in the ways that individuals thought about the prospects for the democratic future and their place in it.

The dawn of the democratic era coincided with a massive shift in national economic logic and identity. In their messages to the president, middle and lower-middle class individuals alluded to that fact, and they grappled with the interplay between internal and external constraints. A young man named Jorge wrote to Alfonsín with a dilemma on December 10, 1984, the administration’s one-year anniversary. At twenty-three, he recently received his accounting certification and hoped to marry and buy a house with his fiancé. “Like so many,” he lamented, “we are unable to save money.” Though they hesitated to write given “all of the problems facing the country,” the young couple sought the president’s counsel:

…[O]ur concern is this: our friends and acquaintances (people who call themselves honest!) advise us to invest in Dollars. We think this is detrimental to national interests, despite the benefits it could give us, and we systematically refuse to speculate with this kind of ‘investment.’ I would like to know your response as the representative of national popular interests.32

Upon first reading, Jorge’s message recalls letters about national debt, acknowledging the relationship between individual action and national economic well-

32 AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90, 44210/84.
being. But Jorge departs somewhat ominously from the positive implications of workers’ donations or telethon broadcasts. While debt may be imposed from outside, Jorge signals two internal threats: dollars (originally from the outside) and the “dishonest” citizens with the will to use them. More critically, Jorge’s letter highlights a presumed incompatibility between “national popular” versus individual interests. The military regime may have hastened the demise of import-substitution industrialization and Keynesianism—two corner stones of what constituted the national popular—however, the social recognition of that shift coincided directly with the return of constitutional government. Writers continually expressed their dismay at the radical separation of national economic sovereignty from their individual security. “I did not speculate and look where it got me!” exclaimed an irate small business owner as he recounted the rise and fall of his furniture factory and subsequent bankruptcy.\footnote{AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 306, no number on the letter.} The Alfonsín government’s mandate was to recuperate, recalibrate, and redefine the meanings of the national popular. Throughout the 1980s, individuals struggled with their own definitions and repositioned themselves within altered political and economic landscapes. They did so as individuals and as citizens of a body politic. As the Alfonsín years wore on, however, the perceived antagonism of these spheres—between civic versus private identities—became more rigid, to the extent that for many Argentines any hope for achieving a greater good would come at the expense of personal well-being, and vice versa.

Perhaps nowhere do the tensions between nation, personal prosperity, and democratic futures emerge more forcefully than in letters from individuals contemplating emigration. Sent by for the most part by educated professionals with the training and means to look for work abroad, their descriptions of the difficult decision to leave
Argentina began arriving as early as February 1984, two months into the administration. Many writers commented on the present in terms of a bitter historical reversal of the massive influx of Europeans that characterized Argentina at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. A 30-year old professional summarized his situation thusly: “I find myself in the same position as our parents and grandparents generations ago who were forced to emigrate for work.”\(^{34}\) Others characterized emigration as the ultimate injustice following fruitless job searches. Hector, a civil engineer, lost his job at the Atucha II nuclear power plant when construction began to stall. As he explained in his 1985 letter, “In the public agencies they tell me that I need some sort of palanca (contact)…and in the private sector it’s always the same familiar phrase, ‘all shut down, we’re downsizing.’ I love this country. I want to work in it and for it. This [letter] is my last hope…the next step will be to emigrate, but for me and my family that would be like cutting the roots of a tree that is still growing at full force.”\(^{35}\) Citizen writers sometimes wielded emigration as a threat. More often it was presented as a painful resignation, the final step after a long period of confusion and uncertainty, and the gradual extinguishing of other options. The decision to write the president evidenced both the seriousness and futility of the predicament: Writing, proof that the decision to leave did not come lightly, was also unlikely to result in action, presidential or otherwise, to reverse the situation. Yet through their letters, writers symbolically inscribed themselves as part of the nation, including the president in their deliberations, perhaps as a way to implicate Alfonsín or to exculpate themselves, while officially registering that emigration—characterized by

\(^{34}\) AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 417-58721/85.

Hector as the final, artificial severing of “natural roots”—was not entirely of the their own making.

Individuals who returned from abroad, enticed by the promise of the new democracy, also wrote to Alfonsín with their growing disenchantment. Susana was a young newlywed when she left Argentina in the early 1970s, “facing economic impossibility, and the uncertainty of those days, never knowing where another bomb was going to go off.” Following several years in Venezuela and the United States, where her husband received a master’s degree from Berkeley, she and her family settled in Italy before returning to Argentina following Alfonsín’s election. Three years after her return home, she wrote:

But the ‘buts’ began to mount as soon as we discovered that the only position the country could offer one of its sons with training and experience was a few ad honorem hours at the UBA [University of Buenos Aires], which he of course accepted because we decided to come back to ‘do something’ for the country…Or when we discovered that the projects my husband could apply for were now all being sent abroad…Little by little we have also begun to look abroad, where at least we know we are welcome. This letter cannot express our sadness and disappointment. We believed that this was the moment, and yet day-by-day we see that we were wrong…And this is another reason why I am writing, because I believe there are many of us in the same situation.36

Susana acknowledges membership in a wider community originally forced abroad due to a combination of perceived violence and lack of opportunity. While the risk of “bombs going off” may have dissipated, Susana sees that threat as having been replaced by equally destabilizing economic forces conspiring to push her and her family out again. Silvia, a 34-year old architect, wrote Alfonsin upon her return from six years in Italy with a similarly blunt assessment: “Mr. President, I have heard you say that the political exiles can come back with guarantees of work, security, and stability, but what about the

“economic exiles?” Susana and Silvia’s reference to violence and “exile,” a highly charged term with its connotations of state terrorism and victimization, is striking. In their appropriation of the language of human rights, the founding principle of the Alfonsín administration, they identify themselves as casualties of the dictatorship and therefore entitled to guarantees of justice and redress.

Though one of the enduring legacies of the Argentine transition to democracy is human rights policy and the efforts to end the impunity of the armed forces—from the much lauded Nunca Más report, to the groundbreaking trials against the military regime, to the equally criticized limitations on legal proceedings—these events are strikingly absent in the correspondence to Alfonsín. While Alfonsín did receive letters and telegrams following the carapintadas uprisings, and messages of moral outrage following the passage of the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws, the overall epistolary silence is deafening compared to scholarly attention to the imprint of these events during the Alfonsín years and beyond. One important qualification is necessary on this point: With respect to human rights, individuals could mediate their concerns through vast activist

38 Between April and September 1985, the Federal Chamber heard testimony from survivors of clandestine detention centers, victims’ relatives, and international leaders. In December, nine of the main junta leaders were sentenced to life imprisonment for treasonous homicides, illegal deprivations of liberty, torture, and robbery. As the trials began to expand their scope to lower-ranking officers, sectors of the military threatened to boycott the proceedings, increasing fears of possible revolt. In response to escalating military unrest, in December 1986 congress passed the “Full Stop Law,” the first of two measures that would place limits on on-going legal processes. The law stipulated a 60-day statute of limitations, after which no further charges could be brought against military officers suspected of crimes. In April 1987, a contingent of lower-ranking officers calling themselves the carapintadas (painted faces) occupied the largest military garrison in Argentina, demanding an end to trials. Alfonsín brokered the deal that ended the uprising, and in July Congress passed the “Due Obedience” law, which exempted from prosecution lower-ranking officers who tortured or murdered in fulfillment of orders. For an overview of these events and a brief history of the modern Argentine human rights movement see Elizabeth Jelin’s article, “Los derechos humanos: entre el estado y la sociedad,” in Nueva Historia Argentina. vol. 10, Dictadura y Democracia (1976-2001), ed. Juan Suriano (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2005), 507-557.
networks and institutions, to the extent that a letter to Alfonsín was an unlikely, comparatively ineffectual, venue of protest or support.

Citizen Petitioners often highlighted their identity as part of the “unaffiliated” masses, a status which not only justified unmediated contact with the president, but also distilled petitions to a pure state of need, opinion, or praise, seemingly impervious to outside political or ideological influences. However, this is not to argue that human rights were not a social concern of “ordinary” Argentines during the 1980s. On the contrary, citizen letters demonstrate a multivalent notion of human rights, transformed into ideals along the lines of Silvia and Susana’s desires to remain in Argentina.

The language of human rights penetrated social life, and was appropriated and refitted to highly charged conceptions of home, national belonging, and material safety, among many others. In 1986, Martha, a single mother of three, wrote of her painful, six-year struggle to fight eviction and secure housing for her family in Córdoba and Buenos Aires. Towards the middle of her five-page letter, she plainly declares, “I believe that if your heart has feeling enough to bring back all of the exiles, then you could also save us from the exile we were sent into by human insensitivity. That would give us the chance to believe that Justice really does exist.” ³⁹ Martha described her own internal exile—an endless saga of cancelled social worker visits, unscrupulous landlords, and sleepless nights—severed from the institutions meant to help her. That sentiment is echoed in a hastily written message from Zulema. Writing from “the entrance to the Tribunales court” in the center of Buenos Aires, where she was attempting to contest an eviction notice, the urgency of Zulema’s letter is palpable: “Please, please we need 90, 60, even 30 days to find a new place to live.” As she explained, the letter was her last-ditch effort

³⁹ AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 8, 10815/84.
to help her family: “Mr. President, I am turning to you because I know that you are very Humane person, and that this is a Human Right…Now that we live in democracy, how can our children live in the streets.”\textsuperscript{40} Homelessness, the brutally apt metaphor and physical condition for the disenfranchisement depicted by Zulema and Martha, falls under the rubric of human rights and democracy, affording the women new ways to talk about and assert much older demands. The language of human rights bolstered claims for citizenship. At the same time, citizens wielded the rhetoric of rights to place in greater relief the current injustices against which the new democracy was being measured.

Often, however, the official response from Alfonsín regarding the economic and future was far from reassuring. By the one-year anniversary of the administration, the panorama looked bleak. Consumer prices continued to rise, and in 1984, annual inflation peaked at 688 percent, up from 433 percent the previous year.\textsuperscript{41} Runaway price increases undermined the purchasing power of real wages. Loan restructuring with the IMF essentially meant that Argentina would get new loans in order to pay interest on old loans. The administration’s early attempts to create a Latin American “debtors club” had also begun to fizzle. In the meantime, the overall burden of the debt continued to grow.\textsuperscript{42} While Alfonsín’s pronouncements decried the pressures of global lending institutions, and repudiated the economic philosophy of the military regime, his proposals could also sound vague:

\begin{quote}
We are going to combat inflation, and at the same time were are going to make real wages grow, and at the same time we will expand the Argentine economy.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 3, 15513/84.
\textsuperscript{41} Mario Rapoport, \textit{Historia económica, política y social de la Argentina (1880-2003)}, (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2006), 707.
\textsuperscript{42} Veigel, 144.
The technocrats of failure, the technocrats of Argentine misfortune are afraid. They say [our goals] are incompatible. To them, we say no.\textsuperscript{43}

Part of the haziness of Alfonsín’s language stemmed from the fact that he, along with his economic team, did not always grasp the economic scenario they were describing. The early 1980s marked the final death throes of the Bretton Woods consensus. For close to forty years, the state took the lead as guarantor of welfare, jobs, and economic growth. By the early 1980s, the “common sense” of this approach was in full crisis. Advocates for a new world order argued that the path to economic and personal freedom lay in divesting the state from market controls. The separation of the fiscal from the governmental realm formed the essence of a burgeoning neoliberal worldview. The United States - particularly policy makers at the US Federal Reserve - were at the epicenter of this transformation.\textsuperscript{44} The recessionary dip and inflationary fears of the late 1970s, which had sealed the fate of Jimmy Carter’s presidency, coalesced with a revived and ideological right-wing base, which helped shore up support for formulas “to curb the power of labour, deregulate industry, agriculture, resource extraction, and liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage.”\textsuperscript{45} It was “morning again in America,” as Ronald Reagan broadcasted. Yet, Reagan’s domestic vision was completely bound up in the global arena, in particular with the fate of the debtor nations of the developing world whose debt came due in US dollars. Beginning with the Mexican

\textsuperscript{43} Quoted from Gerardo Aboy Carlés, Las dos fronteras de la democracia argentina :la reformulación de las identidades políticas de Alfonsín a Menem (Buenos Aires: HomoSapiens Ediciones, 2001), 173.

\textsuperscript{44} Neoliberalism has a very uneven global history. In the case of Latin America, the beginning of the neoliberal era is generally dated to the U.S.-sponsored overthrow of the Salvador Allende government, and the subsequent Pinochet regime. See: William Robinson, Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US intervention, and Hegemony (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Though the United States was at the helm of many of the ideological transformations that contributed to the rise of the neoliberal world-view, neoliberalism also found many domestic proponents worldwide. For a more recent attempt to historicize the multiple histories of neoliberalism, see the special issue of Radical History Review, “Genealogies of Neoliberalism,” Number 112, Winter 2012.

\textsuperscript{45} David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1.
default of 1982, the dawn of the new decade sparked economic transformations experienced primarily in the form of social and fiscal crisis throughout Latin America.

From factory closings, to hunger, to rising food prices, the crisis visibly marked Argentina. However, the full scale implications of the shifting global order were nebulous at best. As mentioned above, the first cohort at the helm of the Ministry of Economy came of professional age decades before, having managed the economy during the 1963-1966 government of Arturo Illía. In the intervening years, the world had profoundly changed. Much like the public perceptions of the economy, the government also approached the fiscal realm with a sense of the unknown. The embrace of full-scale privatizations and deregulations were not yet part of the common sense of government practice and lived experience - neither globally and certainly not within Argentina. The effects of the dictatorship prompted widespread calls to counter the divesting impulse of neoliberalism’s advocates. The economic philosophy of the regime was not an option. However, the path of mid-twentieth century state planning was not only increasingly untenable on a global stage, it was also not working on the ground. “We were caught between two worlds,” as one administration official characterized the dilemma.46 The tension between the encroaching reality of a changing global economy, and the constraints of fast expiring methods of economic planning began to alter the Alfonsín administration’s fiscal course from late 1984 on.

Social and economic citizenship were in flux during the Alfonsín years. In their proposals to Alfonsín, individuals grappled with unknowns, and the sense of being “caught between two worlds” in often unexpected ways. Roberto, a father of four from Quilmes, wrote to Alfonsín advocating achicamiento del estado (shrinking the state) as

the solution to Argentina’s economic difficulties. Roberto’s proposal was surprising given that several paragraphs into his letter he introduces himself as a municipal worker. “I have given 30 of the best years of my life to the public sector,” he declared, not without a touch of pride. As he recalled his work in the municipality, he described how over the decades the local government transformed into a “holding pen” for incompetent bureaucrats. Several features of Roberto’s letter deserve mention. For one, Roberto’s use of the phrase *achicar el estado* echoed the dictatorship-era Minister of Economy, José Martínez de Hoz, who infamously proclaimed that his policies would shrink the state in order to *agrandar la nación* (“shrink the state to enlarge the nation”). Throughout the 1980s, streamlining the state hovered in public debate as one route to achieve fiscal solvency, keep inflation in check, and reduce the public deficit. In this sense, Roberto seemed in line with mainstream center-right economists and commentators of the day, including, as time went on, more than a few vocal members of the Alfonsín government. Yet, Roberto’s solution, far from purging the public sector, was special government-sponsored unemployment insurance and job-training programs to reposition municipal employees for work in state industries or the private sector. Roberto hints at a moment during the 1980s when associations of privatization were still somewhat up for grabs, when “shrinking” could also imply reform and the maintenance of public enterprise, not long before the massive application of structural readjustment in the 1990s. Roberto concluded his three-page letter with a thoughtful commentary on the possible constraints to achieving economic recovery, connecting the declining industrial economy of Quilmes to Argentina’s position in the global economy: “So today I ask myself what our role will
be in the future if our local industry is practically destroyed and we are not in any condition to compete with Japan, Germany, the USA, etc. etc.”

“Wartime Economy”

In early 1985, Bernardo Grinspun was replaced. Juan Vital Sourrouille, the Planning Secretary, took over as the new Minister of the Economy, while Grinspun assumed Sourrouille’s old post. The leadership transfer marked a dual shift, generationally and in terms of economic philosophy. Grinspun, a member of the Radical party with experience in government office, was replaced in favor of a younger cohort of technocrats, who had no formal affiliation with the UCR, and whose careers were forged regionally and abroad in think tanks and academic institutions. The shift in economic leadership also signaled a change in the approach to economic recovery. Like Grinspun, the functionaries under Sourrouille trained in cepalista theories of developmentalism and dependency, however, the new group at the head of the Ministry disagreed with Grinspun. They argued that economic stability lay in inflationary controls. Grinspun had looked to expand internal industry and consumption. The success of that plan presumed that strengthening domestic markets via job creation and industrial expansion would keep inflation in check. However, in the context of the global recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s, inflation and foreign debt became inextricably linked. Promises to control inflation became one of the main requirements for debtor nations to secure new loans and refinance existing debt. Inflation was not a new concern in Argentina. The recently installed planners and economists at the Ministry of Economy had only to look to the inflationary crisis of the 1975 Rodrigazo, which hastened the demise of Isabel Perón’s

47 AGN/DAI, “Presidencia Alfonsín,”: Legajo 40, 58604/84.
fragile government. The memory of that experience fortified their convictions. Controlling inflation increasingly overshadowed all other economic concerns in order to maintain debt payments and to safeguard domestic peace. But government officials got caught in a double bind: Triple digit inflation had impeded Grinspun’s attempts to revive the economy through industrial expansion, however, combating inflation meant adopting IMF demands, which further impeded the goals of domestic development. The 1980s added a new contour to the history of dependency in Latin America with powerful lending institutions playing an increasingly dominant role in the trajectory of domestic decision making.

Alfonsin introduced a change in economic planning in April 1985. The military trials had recently begun, and rumors circulated of a possible revolt. There was apprehension in the air and Alfonsin issued a call for a public assembly in the “name of democracy.” Thousands flocked to the Plaza de Mayo to support the momentum of the trials and to defend the human rights principles upon which the new democracy was based. The UCR faithful gathered to repudiate the military threat along with columns from the Partido Intransigente, Peronism, human rights group, and unions. To cheering crowds, Alfonsin began his speech from the balcony of the government house with a tally of the achievements of the young democracy, and a firm commitment to continue the trials. However, the president veered dramatically from the subject of the military

minutes into the speech:

---

48 The *Rodrigazo* refers to the set of draconian economic measures instituted in June 1975 by Celestino Rodrigo, the Minister of Economy during the government of Isabel Perón. The policies, which included a wage freeze and a massive increase in the cost of public services, prompted widespread chaos and reprobation, and the beginning of the end of Perón’s government.

But that is not what has brought you here tonight. I don’t intend to take stock of all of the government’s actions…I want to talk about the difficult situation that we are going to face. We have inherited an extremely difficult situation. We have inherited a crazed (desquiciada) economy and a devastated state…First, there is the legitimate voice of popular sectors who are expressing just demands. At the same time, we must put the economy in order and this will be achieved through an adjustment (ajuste) that will demand all of our strength. Finally, there is a third pressure, which is the need for economic growth. Recessions, when they persist over time, demoralize people and impede the realization of democracy. When faced with a bleeding economy we must respond to popular demands, and at the same time we have to order the economy and we have to grow. Compatriots, this is called a wartime economy, and we all need to draw conclusions.50

Alfonsín highlighted the challenge and popular mandate of his government to balance the demands for justice, economic planning, and economic growth. According to the socially-grounded definition of democracy that formed the basis of Alfonsín’s legitimacy, these were compatible and mutually reinforcing goals. The announcement of a “wartime economy” contradicted the official blueprint of the social and economic forces required to achieve democracy. For the crowds gathered in the plaza, the new scenario smacked of a radical departure in thought and action.

Alfonsín went on to compare Argentina’s situation with the devastation of post-war Europe and Japan, nations, he declared, that are “now among the wealthiest in the world.” The path forward called for collective sacrifice. Argentina, a war torn nation, required drastic new measures. Combating inflation was at the top of that list. Though he did not mention specifics, the president outlined a new approach to the economy, which would prioritize reducing the fiscal deficit through cutbacks in public spending. The other component, he added, would be to privatize select state enterprises. Inflation controls,

reductions in public spending, and privatizations were the baseline reforms advocated by orthodox economists and international lending institutions. Alfonsín described these “adjustments” as the sacrifices of a nation committed to safeguarding democracy. The economic crisis constituted a state of exception. Accordingly, the president continued, that crisis justified a change of course to salvage democracy via the same recipes he had so often decried.

Few doubted the diagnosis that something needed to be done to improve the economy, however, Alfonsín’s depiction of a wartime crisis akin to post-war Europe and Japan struck many as disingenuous. For one, even as Argentina blazed a path of democratization in the region, there was no Marshall Plan for South America. International support and investment entailed draconian measures that hampered economic reconstruction and domestic expansion. The United States, far from supporting Argentina, was ideologically and economically engaged in “democracy promotion” of a vastly different sort in Central America.51 “Wartime economy” was also an infelicitous choice of words. While Alfonsín sought to rouse patriotic fervor through calls for individual sacrifice and collective will, the military regime had also galvanized support for the sacrifices of a justified “dirty war.” Finally, there was the ruse of the speech itself. Alfonsín issued a call for a national gathering to repudiate the military. But when people arrived to the Plaza, they learned that inflation, not the armed forces, was the true enemy of democracy. That switch, plus the announcement of a drastic change in economic planning via recipes associated with the military regime, alienated the crowd. Throngs of supporters and members of oppositional parties left the plaza in disgust. The

pronouncement of a wartime economy definitively inverted the relationship between political democracy and economic health originally promoted by the Alfonsín government. The wartime economy implied that without economic stability there would be no political democracy. As people departed the plaza, having been attracted by the inspiring call to defend democracy from the military threat, they questioned whether the real sacrifices to come would be the realization of social justice.

While critics charged that Alfonsín was readying the nation for full scale structural readjustment, the resulting plan was much more heterodox. In June 1985, the administration formally launched the Austral Plan, a “shock” program aimed at halting inflation, and promoting economic growth and employment. The Austral Plan mixed the old with the new: It incorporated heterodox economic principles with concessions to the global economic transition taking place. The core of the plan consisted of a monetary reform through the creation of a new currency, the Austral. The currency cut three zeros off of the peso, dramatically reducing inflation almost immediately. The plan also included other pro-market recipes: The central bank committed to curb bill printing, while overall state expenditures were cut from approximately 35% of GDP in 1983, to 28.8% in 1986.52 However, the other side of the plan was grounded in Grinspun’s early intentions via a system of prices controls and income policies in the form of wage and tariff freezes, and maximum price listings for basic food stuffs. Lawmakers took aim or praised the Austral Plan based on their ideological affiliations. For the right-wing Unión del Centro Democrático (UCeDe), cuts to state spending did not go far enough, though party leaders approved of the plan’s more orthodox features, which they claimed “we

52 Veigel, 152.
have been calling for over thirty years.” For Peronists and the Partido Intransigente, the Austral represented woeful proof of the “anti-popular” designs of the administration.

The administration staked its legitimacy on the success of the Austral Plan. Almost immediately, the gamble worked. Financial institutions closed for several days leading up to the formal launch of the Austral currency. On the day the banks reopened, an administration official from the Ministry of Economy walked by a bank with a line stretching for two blocks. “We’re screwed,” he thought, assuming that people were anxious to take their money out of the banks in order to buy dollars. As he cautiously approached people in the line, he learned that they were actually there to renew their deposits. Thrilled, he ordered coffee for the entire crowd. The anecdote evidenced the importance of public acceptance to the success of the Austral, while hinting at the massive overhaul that the plan entailed. The Austral required weeks of readying

53 Quoted from Mariana Heredia, “La demarcación de la frontera entre economía y política en democracia. Actores y controversias en torno de la política económica de Alfonsín,” in Puciarelli, Los años de Alfonsín, 185.

54 Critics of the new economic plan, including many administration members who felt left out of deliberations, also took aim at the way the program was launched. The Austral unfolded in secrecy. Top officials at the IMF and the US Federal Reserve knew of and approved the plan. In addition, a limited handful of Argentine “barons of industry” were apprised of the Austral’s general outlines, since their cooperation would determine the success of the price controls on which the plan hinged. But congress and the public remained in the dark. The “shock” rationale of the Austral relied on the social acceptance of measures that would come seemingly out of nowhere to freeze inflation in its tracks and then reverse it. Alfonsin passed the Austral via decree, bypassing parliamentary debate. The decision angered many lawmakers. Critics from the Peronist Party, the Partido Intransigente, and the UCR itself, argued that Alfonsín’s use of the power of presidential decree was fundamentally authoritative, undemocratic, and economically unsound. Their concerns related less to a criticism of the tradition of “personalism” and presidential power in Argentina, than the locus of democratic decision-making. At the onset of the administration, Alfonsin relied on the newly restored legislature to consolidate the new democracy. The Austral deliberations situated Alfonsín as the main arbiter between powerful interest groups, both domestic and foreign, with a stake in the trajectory of the economy and domestic politics. As the next chapter will discuss in further detail, Alfonsin increasingly used the weight of his personal leadership to negotiate with interest groups, and a vociferous opposition, which often came together in the form of quixotic alliances between labor, business, and agro producers. Alfonsin claimed that concessions to foreign and domestic coalitions would protect the social goals of the government and the young democracy. More often than not, the approach strengthened the government’s strongest critics, while sidelining and alienating supporters.

Argentines for changes: banks closed to stock up on the new currency; maximum price listings appeared in newspapers; grocery stores recalculated merchandise; conversion lists were posted in public to help people adjust to new exchange rates and time tables, from rental properties to business contracts. Government officials like the one quoted above were genuinely thrilled that the Austral seemed to meet with immediate acceptance. At the same time, they counted on the fact that the economic plan left individuals very little room to divest from the national economy in which they were intimately connected, and on which their well-being depended.

The success of the “wartime economy” hinged on public adherence to the plan. It counted, literally, on the daily economic actions of individuals to keep the economy solvent, whether via maintaining bank deposits or adhering to price controls. In Quilmes, for example, the local newspaper *El Sol* printed listings of the businesses that had been sanctioned or shut down for not following new price controls. In one day, 19 stores were closed by government inspectors.\(^56\) In Avellaneda, the city located right over the border of Buenos Aires, the municipal government set up special numbers for people to call in to report on businesses that were not following price guidelines. The municipal government convened members of the Buenos Aires provincial bakers union, grocery store owners, leaders of neighborhood organizations, and municipal representatives to build support for the new plan. The mayor, Luis Sagol of the UCR, argued that the actions of small and medium size producers gathered in the municipality constituted “the best way to consolidate (afianzar) support.” He continued:

We will set an example from the democratic and representative institutions that have been restored by the rule of law and the constitution. ‘Setting an example’ means continuing with the prices freezes on tariffs and taxes as established by the

---

\(^{56}\) *El Sol*, “Clausuraron otros 19 comercios en Quilmes,” July 17, 1985. 2.
municipal budget, and insisting on spending reductions that have been a practice of this [municipal] administration from the beginning.\textsuperscript{57}

The mayor charged small and medium sized producers, merchants, and local government officials with ensuring the success of the Austral Plan, and by extension democracy itself. The mayor equated democratic mechanisms not with voting or protest, but with price controls, tariffs, and reigning in public spending. These fiscal measures, he intimated, constituted democratic public service. Accordingly then, democratic leaders - unions, food producers, shop owners, and community representatives - were committed to transmitting that message to citizen-consumers.

When individual citizens did speak about public services and the institutions that they interacted with on a daily basis, they often expressed their demands in the form of complaint. These judgments and observations reflect evolving beliefs about democracy itself throughout the 1980s. A doctor named Eugenio seethed in a letter as he recalled his quest to install and repair his home phone line. His 1987 letter included a veritable dossier, dating back to 1983, of bureaucratic travails, attempts to contact the state phone company, politicians, even the federal police. “How can it be,” he fumed, “that in full democracy NOBODY has responded or even acknowledged receipt of my request!”\textsuperscript{58} A similar message from Velia, a single mother of two, described her attempts to contact the municipal authorities, though under more tragic circumstances. Her 77-year old father had recently been killed during a hit-and-run accident as he crossed a busy intersection in Buenos Aires. After her letters to city officials had gone unanswered, she decided to write to Alfonsín. “I am an Argentine citizen who awaited the triumph of democracy with much excitement,” she began. “Thanks to Ex-Intendent Cacciatore,” the military mayor

\textsuperscript{58} AGN/DAI: “Presidencia Alfonsín,” Legajo 90, 44199-9-0005.
of Buenos Aires most notorious for razing entire neighborhoods and expelling thousands of residents to make way for a massive highway system, her street had become a “death trap,” with car races day and night and drivers using the zone as freeway. With an elementary school located nearby and no synchronized traffic lights, Velia feared another accident. Her petition campaign to make the intersection safer fell upon deaf ears and in her mourning she endured a further impunity as the woman who hit her father turned out to be the girlfriend of a police captain. Frustrated, she pleaded with the president to intervene locally, signing her letter, “JUSTICIA!”

Velia is one of few authors to directly allude to the policies of the military regime. For the most part citizen letters to Alfonsín did not cite recent history, though many of their grievances could be traced back to the deregulations set in motion during the dictatorship. Instead, blame for current injustices resided in the immediate present, in the institutions and public offices that citizens interacted with on a municipal and neighborhood level every day. Jorge and Velia employ “democracy” as a rhetorical flourish to bolster their claims and to ground them in the moral language of the day. In doing so, they and many others may have believed their petitions would be taken seriously. Individuals interpreted democracy through their own experience, to both personal and public ends, and linked them to broader notions of justice, government accountability, and changes in political culture. Concretely, democracy meant fixing traffic lights, installing phone lines, filling potholes, reopening factories in the industrial belt surrounding Buenos Aires, and fortifying sewage systems and water supplies. These were the tasks imposed by citizens on the Radical government and what it was ultimately judged upon. A social definition of democracy comes into focus through these citizen

messages to the president, one that combined political openings—enacted in letters through an epistolary relationship with the president—with a socially-grounded vision of rights, assertions of collective welfare and security, and individual prosperity.

At the same time, citizen complaints about services often painted a picture of a highly dysfunctional public sector. The long lines in government offices, interminable paperwork, and recalcitrant officials, main tropes of the Argentine bureaucracy, were precisely what individuals expected democracy to reverse. While it is tempting to see these complaints as leading to the legitimacy of state privatization, this view is both deceptive and incomplete. The messages to the president illustrate a state that was at once omnipresent, yet inaccessible; demanding, yet unaccountable; interventionist, yet ineffective. There was widespread agreement on the need for state reform, however, no clear consensus emerged regarding how that should occur. Some citizen proposals advocated privatization and outright dollarization of the economy; for many others the state remained a source of jobs and security. From 1983-1989, thousands of employment requests were remitted to ENTEL, the state phone company, and SEGBA, the utility company of Greater Buenos Aires. Nor did citizen proposals break down easily along class lines, with the upper-middle class embracing structural readjustment, and lower income sectors holding fast to the institutions and policies of the Peronist era. These ideas could exist together in seemingly contradictory ways.

The interplay between public enterprise, local government, and consumption made up an evolving moral economy of democracy. Notions of economic fairness and justice, and the state’s role in ensuring both, fluctuated with the return of democracy. The early failure of the veda de carne, and the spike in calls for government divestment were
proof of a social questioning of state intervention. Yet some baseline beliefs about equity were more fixed, as citizen messages to Alfonsín make clear. For democracy to work, individuals counted on the state to facilitate economic redistribution. The shock of the announcement of a “wartime economy” ran counter to widely accepted social views that equated democratic restoration with social justice. The Austral Plan was a partial recognition of the embeddedness of those beliefs, at the same time that it was a movement toward a new global order.

“Parque Norte”: Democratic Subjects and Subjectivities

Individuals felt the positive effects of the Austral Plan almost immediately. Inflation dwindled, dropping drastically from month to month. Between 1984-1985 annual inflation went from 688 percent to 385 percent.\textsuperscript{60} By mid 1986, inflation had reached its lowest point since 1974.\textsuperscript{61} Government propaganda for the plan seemed to rightly declare, “We are fighting inflation. All Argentines…By following this conversion plan, buyers and sellers win. The only loss will be inflation.”\textsuperscript{62} By the second half of 1985, the Austral Plan initiated the greatest period of social peace during the Alfonsín years. Though there was a general strike in early Spring, tense relations with labor were offset by the successful completion of the military trials and the sentencing of nine of the main junta leaders. In the November 1985 legislative elections, the UCR received approximately 43% of overall votes, maintaining its majority in the Lower House. The government also began to make designs on two of its boldest initiatives, constitutional reform and the transfer of the capital from Buenos Aires to the Patagonian city of

\textsuperscript{60} Mario Rapaport, 707.
\textsuperscript{61} Veigel, 153.
Viedma. Though both plans were ultimately derailed, they formed part of an attempt to launch a hegemonic project to overhaul the foundations of Argentine political culture.

Economic peace gave the administration the room to move forward on its most ambitious vision for the democratic republic. On December 1, 1985, Alfonsín presented his outline to the delegates of the UCR national committee. “The Parque Norte Speech,” named after the recreation complex where Alfonsín delivered the address, was the most comprehensive articulation of a democratic project for Argentina since assuming office. Though the speech was delivered to UCR party leaders, the scope and content of the address were directed to the nation as a whole. Parque Norte emphasized three values - “participation,” an “ethic of solidarity,” and “modernization” - as the components necessary for the construction of a democratic society and subjects. Alfonsín argued that these elements were mutually reinforcing and complementary goals. For democracy to work, however, it required a renewed “social pact” to adhere its constituent parts. Though “participation, ethic of solidarity, and modernization” relate to multiple iterations of political theory as to render them meaningless at times, each component was attached to a specific interpretation of Argentine history and political tradition. Based on the general premise of the Argentine past as fundamentally authoritarian and antagonistic, the main argument of Parque Norte emphasized that “democracy [did] not need to be restored, it

must be constructed.” Parque Norte provided the template.

Democracy, as defined in Parque Norte, began with the construction of democratic subjects. In contrast to the isolation and egoism of the dictatorship, the future would be based on participation in public life. Participation, according to the outline of Parque Norte, began in the realm of la vida cotidiana, daily life. Though not specific, daily life consisted of the public and private institutions that impacted individual lives. Participation originated in these institutions - political parties, social organizations, municipal governments, neighborhood councils - and from there buttressed “solidarity and national unity.” The “ethic of solidarity,” the second part of the democratic trinity, combined individual concerns with the public good. Based on the assumption that society needed to be constructed with the needs of the most desposeidos, least fortunate, in mind, an ethic of solidarity would provide for the just distribution of goods and services.

Participation and an ethic of solidarity would then reinforce “modernization.”

Modernization, defined broadly as economic development, had social justice at its core. It involved the state, but it was not statist. Modernization did not equal an embrace of privatization either. As part of a socially democratic project, “modernization” would transcend both “extreme statists and privatizers.”

---


65 The story behind Parque Norte deserves mention and is worthy of more in depth historical study. The speech was written by members of a group intellectual advisors to Alfonsín known as the “Grupo Esmeralda,” in honor of the street in Buenos Aires where they met. The most prominent members of the Grupo Esmeralda were leftist intellectuals recently returned from exile. Though members of the Grupo Esmeralda did not have a direct impact on policy design, they were key interlocutors to the president. Emilio de Ipola and Juan Carlos Portantiero are perhaps the best-known contributors to Esmeralda, however, the group also included a small but varied assembly of journalists, sociologists, and jurists. The evolution of Alfonsín’s ideas about democracy found a logical link with this group of intellectuals, who were themselves engaged in vigorous theoretical reformulations of political democracy and human rights.
Parque Norte was premised on an interpretation of Argentine history dominated by a pattern of authoritarianism and violence. That narrative reflected the immediacy of the dictatorship, the fight between the extreme right and left, and the savagery of state terrorism, but it originated, according to the text of the speech, in the institutional breakdown of the 1930 military coup, which initiated a half-century of ever greater cycles of violence. From mid-century on, opposing camps pursued national “progress” by obliterating perceived internal enemies. Though this historical narrative emphasized authoritarianism and bloodshed, the content of democratic society would also emerge from the democratic impulses of the dominant political movements of modern Argentina. “Participation, ethic of solidarity, and modernization,” would bring together and fulfill the democratic transitions that were Yrigoyensimo and Peronismo themselves. Parque Norte removed the charge of “obliteration” from social and political life, and put forward a balance between public versus private, individual versus society, and left versus right. The democratic Argentina outlined in Parque Norte would finally achieve the national popular through a reconciliation of the liberal republic and the popular republic. Parque Norte during the 1980s, the center of leftist intellectual debate found a home in the newly created Club de Cultura Socialista, and in the journals Punto de vista, and Ciudad Futura. As members of a generation that only a few years before had advocated revolution as the solution to the structural ills of Argentina and Latin America, the ideas in Parque Norte can also be read as part of larger debate about the transformation of the Left in Latin America during the years immediately following the dictatorship. For a brief overview of the role of the Grupo Esmeralda in the Alfonsín government, see: Josefina Elizade, La participación política de los intelectuales durante la transición democrática: el Grupo Esmeralda y el presidente Alfonsín, Temas de historia argentina y americana, 15 (2009). Available online: http://bibliotecadigital.uca.edu.ar/repositorio/revistas/participacion-politica-intelectuales-durante-transicion.pdf. (Accessed: February 12, 2012). See also: Cecilia Lesgart, Usos de la transición a la democracia. Ensayo, ciencia y política en la década del ‘80, (Rosario: Homo Sapiens Ediciones, 2003); and Mariano Plotkin and Ricardo González Leandri, “El regreso de la democracia y la consolidación de nuevas élites intelectuales. El caso de Punto de Vista: Revista de Cultura. Buenos Aires (1978-1985)”, in Mariano Plotkin and Ricardo González Leandri, Localismo y globalización. Aportes para una historia de los intelectuales en Iberoamérica, (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto de Historia, 2000).
Norte did not represent a “third position” or “third historical movement,” it was, as Gerardo Aboy Carlès has termed it, the outline for a Second Republic.\textsuperscript{66}

Alfonsín presented a course to transcend the antagonisms of Argentine political culture and history, however, there was a fundamental contradiction at the core of that plan. The “Parque Norte” address also made clear that the UCR was the only political force prepared to take on the task. The final paragraphs of the speech emphasize the history of Radicalism in the evolution of Argentine democracy:

Certainly, Radicalism was a force for renewal that was opposed to Conservatism. But it was not defined as liberal or socialist, nor did it reflect some of the shades in between these two opposing positions. Through its way of doing things, it was a party of synthesis, a party where the demands and principles of freedom, progress and social solidarity found an open channel. Because of this, [Radicalism] has been subject to the frequent critiques of dogmatic parties. Not infrequently it has been charged with ideological vagueness and a lack of theoretical rigor. The irony of history has shown that this so-called ambiguity is today one of its greatest assets, because if anything has characterized Radicalism over the course of nearly a century of existence, it has been the ethical sense of politics and its uncompromising allegiance to the democratic system.

The Parque Norte speech saw the culmination of ideas that Alfonsín and his cohort articulated with founding of the Renovación y Cambio movement in the early 1970s (see Chapter 1). At that time, Renovación y Cambio’s declaration of the historically democratic roots of the UCR found limited support in the midst of the upheavals of the decade. Now, according to Alfonsín, those same values could overcome all the turmoil facing Argentina, not the least of which was the transitional present. The call for a national movement to forge a democratic society concluded with the UCR as the original, and consistently democratic force in Argentina. Yet that notion ran counter to the appeal to overcome the oppositional nature of the Argentine past as laid forth by Parque Norte itself.

\textsuperscript{66} Aboy Carlès, \textit{Las dos fronteras de la democracia argentina}, 171.
As a text, Parque Norte resists simple summary. At times vague and imprecise, categories blur and run into each other, arguments circle back or drop off midway. Parque Norte was not a policy outline, however. It was the blueprint of a democratic mentality that valued in equal measure pluralism and individuality as the essence of modern society:

The full exercise of citizen rights, individual liberties, and social solidarity form the foundation upon which we will begin to erect the structures of modern society. The new values of the Argentine community - tolerance, rationality, mutual respect, and the peaceful solution to conflicts - will enable the passage from authoritarian society to democratic society, without trauma.

Alfonsín was describing a democratic subject that he claimed had yet to fully emerge. In several instances, he insisted that Argentina was at the crossroads of a transition. Though delivered in the material present, “Parque Norte” looked simultaneously toward a conceptual future and the historical past. The present was a product of history, critical to the construction of the future, yet also seemingly detached from any temporality. The “transitional” present - not authoritarian, yet not fully democratic - resided in a liminal space as a foil for a democratic society still to come. When Parque Norte is analyzed alongside the citizen proposals and messages sent to Alfonsín, a curious congruency results. Letter writers were also attempting to balance individual needs and collective good; justice and economic prosperity; modernization and social progress. But there is key difference: While there is a sense of immediacy to citizen petitions, Parque Norte looked to a future still to be constructed. Yet messages to the president suggest that not only was the “democratic future” already in the process of being constructed, debated, and reformulated; it was simultaneously falling short of its original promises. The values of democratic balance and synthesis, a combination which
had fueled the hopes of many at the onset of the Alfonsín years, was facing serious impediments on the ground locally, while being extinguished on a global scale.

The success of the Austral Plan provided the backdrop for Parque Norte. As mentioned above, Alfonsín delivered the speech during the moment of greatest economic and social peace, not to mention electoral support for the UCR. Stability mattered. However, economic security and political popularity were not the only pre-conditions for the articulation of a democratic project for Argentina. Parque Norte could not have emerged any sooner, since the contours of a democratic vision were being worked out in tandem with events of the ground during the first two years of democratic restoration. From labor negotiations, to military reform, to debt restructuring, Parque Norte emerged at a time when the global and domestic constraints on governability were finally fully visible, and, critically, when the euphoria of the democratic restoration had begun to subside.

Parque Norte was a project for the nation as well as a party platform.\textsuperscript{67} The Radical leaders gathered to listen to Alfonsín had marching orders to transmit the speech and its message back to their local \textit{ateneos}, as UCR party bases were known. Tracing the reception of Parque Norte proved difficult for government officials. Even more difficult, however, was the task laid out for party leaders to install the democratic vision in their local spheres. To cite just one example, the Renovación y Cambio wing of the UCR affiliate in Quilmes published a New Years editorial with verbatim quotes from the speech. The article quoted heavily from the sections that mentioned the UCR, bypassing the political message of synthesis and reconciliation. The editorial concluded, not with a call for a national unity, but with a New Years wish for a compromise between the

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 237.
various factions of the UCR in the district. The message also highlighted the positive results of the Austral Plan as a harbinger for a good year going forward. Parque Norte, as this brief example from Quilmes demonstrates, was incorporated into the realm of partisan concerns. Popular beliefs about democracy did evolve in the realm of daily experience, however, often beyond the limits of party affiliation, as the letters to Alfonsín make clear. Democratic subjectivities took root in public and private realms through appeals to the government, though not necessarily in concert, with the hegemonic project.

Parque Norte marked the highest point of the Alfonsín government, and the pinnacle of democratic consensus. By the second half of 1986, however, inflation again began its steady assent. Inflation continued to rise as government credibility decreased. Administration officials began to talk about the second stage of the Plan Austral. In 1987, the government announced plans to attack the public deficit through much deeper state reforms. To widespread criticism, officials released plans to privatize the petrochemical and airlines industries. By then, however, support for the government had been irreversibly damaged by the first of a series of military uprisings, and bitter reversals of human rights prosecutions. The protection of political institutions retained its potency at the expense, it seemed, of initial hopes for economic and social justice.

In February 1988, Daniel, an accountant from Buenos Aires, wrote to the president. He did so, he believed, “on behalf of a great number of Argentine citizens…the people journalists refer to as ‘undecided voters’, not tied to any party or absolute ideological theories.” Daniel described himself as one of many, “tired of what the country had lived through up until 1983, who gave his support, who believed in you entirely, and in all of the measures the country needed. Only courage was necessary to

---

assume the responsibility that 52% of the citizenry had given you.” He recalled the early
days of the Austral Plan, and boasted, “It was the first time in my life that I lived with
acceptable levels of inflation, and it didn’t matter what had to be done to maintain that
stability. I felt proud to be Argentine and of what people could achieve with their
efforts.” But Daniel’s tone soured abruptly in the following paragraph, “It was a shame,
Mr. President. The only one who didn’t follow through on its word was your
government.” He went on to decry how the early momentum and successes of the
administration were eclipsed by political infighting and the scramble for votes. How, he
asked, could Alfonsín have gone astray, given such overwhelming initial support? “What
a disappointment!” he exclaimed as he concluded with the purpose of his message: “Mr.
President, you have cheated the people and have damaged the sectors that you
theoretically claim to defend, the lower and lower-middle class. That is why the
people—and I include myself in this group—have lost their faith and hope in you. Mr.
President, I am asking you to move up the elections as soon as possible. We have
already lost four years. I beg you, let us not lose two more…”69

Conclusions

Argentina’s democratic opening coincided with the worst national and regional
economic crisis since the Great Depression. From citizen proposals to the president to
highly trained economists in government ministries, Argentines struggled to understand
what that juxtaposition implied for the future of democracy. “Caught between two
worlds,” the phrase on which this chapter is based, evokes multiple interpretations. It
relates first to Argentina’s passage from authoritarianism to republican democracy. It also
evokes the internal and external challenges facing the newly restored government. On the

one hand, the election of Alfonsin opened wide historic contests about the balance between political freedoms and just economic growth rooted in twentieth century political movements. On the other hand, government officials and individuals sought to reposition themselves in the midst of fast expiring mid-century economic policies, and the global onslaught of neoliberalism, the contours of which were still unclear.

This first part of this chapter traced the social life of restored constitutional government as it emerged through personal letters to President Alfonsín. In midst of what one author has described as Argentina’s “modern electoral era,” citizen petitions trigger a type of temporal dissonance. Written in the age of mass media and polling, the act of placing ink to paper offered petitioners a direct, seemingly unmediated relationship with the president, beyond ballot box, or political party. In 1983, the promise of the Alfonsín government was premised on an explicit break between the authoritarian past and the democratic future. Despite impediments on the horizon, writers understood the restoration of political institutions as leading to the amelioration of years of social deprivation. The meanings of democracy—a question that petitioners ask and respond to over and over—were grounded in the dominion of local realities. Obtaining a social worker visit, fixing a traffic light, signing up for a housing subsidy, or lobbying for municipalized sanitation services were inextricably linked to ideals of freedom, rights, and the public good, which writers invoked as tangible transformations that the new government would also guarantee. As economic reforms stalled and as the economy faltered, the urgency of petitions increased in direct relation to changing assumptions of the symbiotic relationship between restored political life and social realities. Over and

---

over, writers outlined their expectations for a democratic state, what they were used to, and what they envisioned with the return of constitutional government. The extent to which institutional changes and reform spilled into private life shaped public opinion during the Alfonsín years and the expectations against which the administration, and the transition itself, were largely measured.

The Alfonsín government’s legitimacy took root in a baseline definition of democracy that denied the traditional separation of social justice and individual freedoms. Critically, however, this notion elevated political democracy as the condition that would guarantee the fulfillment of material need. For many, the Austral Plan demonstrated that economic health could no longer be subordinated to political democracy. Popular beliefs about democracy cannot be reduced to economic stability, however. Economic security certainly mattered, however, individuals tempered growing constraints with widespread faith in the symbolic power of institutional restoration and a break with the authoritarian past. While the tensions between economic sovereignty, democratic futures, and individual well-being were in place from the start of the Alfonsín years, they were not fixed. The moral economy of democracy evolved in tandem with the trajectory of democratic restoration, and individuals continually relocated themselves within rapidly changing economic and social landscapes.

The next chapter looks at the Alfonsín government’s flagship social program, PAN (Programa Alimentario Nacional), and reconstructs how the transition was made locally, on the ground, by women, church officials, and municipal politicians. In the shantytowns surrounding Buenos Aires, PAN networks organized communal purchases,
disaster relief efforts, and food delivery. In these remade political spaces, ideas of rights, democracy, and economic justice were again reinterpreted and enacted in ways that went beyond and challenged the newly restored constitutional government.